

Democratic politics as interpretation of time

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Abstract

Modern culture has found in representative democracy the most refined form of government of our time. This form of democracy created and increments *public time* as confrontation of political parties, of ideologies, of opinions and at the same time as occasion of political participation.

The emergence of *economic time* and of economistic mentality has led to a radical ideological transformation of the meaning of contemporary politics. Public time, within which democratic dialectic took place, has become publicity time; the moral tie of citizenship has been substituted by a plurality of demands; the representation has been reduced to a representation of vested interests, namely a debased form of representation limited in time, space and function.

In face of radical changes and of the claims of economistic mentality one could argue that the political time has come to an end and that the future will be decided by economic time and the force of vested interest. But it is also possible that time of democracy will be reconstructed, taking into account mass phenomena as well as including the emerging aspects of vital worlds.

Keywords

Representative Democracy, Public Time, Citizenship, Representation, Economics as Ideology

Notes

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1. Democracy and Time

In modern culture, politics is above all a process of synthesis and representation of society, of the division of its interests, of the varied experience of daily life. It counters each peculiarity and differentiation with the ideal unity of the group. Just as religion is the interpreter of individual time, politics is an interpretation of social time: it renders profane time sacred and directs it toward the ends of collective action. It was for this very reason that in the 19th century there was a marked distinction in ideal society between the “temple” of politics and the “marketplace” of private interest; the high-priests of the temple were the pure and the good, as opposed to the merchants of the marketplace. In such a secular world, only by acting in this manner was politics able to take upon itself the mission of saving humanity and transforming society, a mission that had up until then been the prerogative of religion. The political voluntarism characteristic of the last two centuries arose out of the sacredness of social time created by politics. The latter found expression right back from the announcement of a “new Christianity” in the works of Saint-Simon, a form of Christianity founded on the transformation of society based on science and through government by the “best”.

That political time has been a sacred time, at least during what is ideally the most fertile modern period, is confirmed by the fact that, while representative democracy has emerged as being the most refined form of government of our time, it is accompanied by myths, symbols and rituals all revolving around the concept of sovereignty of the people.¹

This same mythological and symbolic construct surrounds the great political ideologies that developed around the concept of representation. In modern culture, time is no longer an individual production but is also the collective production of groups that differentiate among themselves and multiply. Therefore, the meaning of the sacred moves from individual time toward social time. Ideological time is the pre-eminent expression of social time and has the task of countering wide degrees of differentiation with the ideal unity of society which draws its meaning from memories of the past or hopes for the future. Orientation in terms of time becomes extremely important in the definition of a political ideal, social representation and in the construction of this or that type of society. *Public time*, a product of modern-day life, is in this way enriched by shades of meaning which compare the real world with the ideal world, so allowing politics to be presented as an interpretation of the past, a forecast and preview of, and a programme for the future and, as a conduct for the present.

It is precisely representative democracy that creates and increments *public time* through the confrontation of political parties, of ideologies, of opinions and as a communicative structure bent on creating those conditions necessary to realise the common good. Public time

¹ See G. Burdeau, *Politica e magia*, in C. Mongardini (a cura di), *Il magico e il moderno*, Milan, F. Angeli, VI edition, 1992 Page 121 onward.

constitutes that occasion dedicated to political participation, an occasion addressing the overall community of individuals inasmuch as each single member, by investing time, can contribute toward the realisation of the common good. By its very nature democratic politics requires the widest possible span of public time, of a space that is sufficient to accommodate its most essential components, namely, *ideological dialectics*, the principle of *citizenship* and that of *representation*.

There can be no democracy when there is no ideological comparison² Only by comparing various ideal designs for society can awareness arise of a form of politics that addresses the issue of the common good. On the other hand ideologies bring about consensus as a result of mediating vested interests by means of their values; they legitimate representation by dictating a moral code binding those who represent to those who are represented. Only too often the function of ideologies has been perceived solely as a matter of totalitarianism, as trickery or as a means of manipulation. The fact is almost always overlooked that they have the function of insulating the unity of the group, of legitimating power, of imposing moral constraints on the actions of the governing class.

The second principle which finds a place within the public time of democracies is that of citizenship. In modern democracies the moral bond of citizenship, with its rights and duties, means that the people can no longer be viewed as subjects. As a symbolic and community bond it has made it possible to develop every manner of differentiation and juxtaposition without these threatening the unity of the group.

Just as citizenship makes inequalities acceptable by upholding the principle of an equal moral condition, representation renders domination acceptable by ensuring that it arises through consensus and legitimisation. If citizenship represents the symbolic unity of the group, representation constitutes its functional unity. It allows the unification of individual wills by means of a relationship of trust and promotes collective action while fully respecting the wills of individuals. With the advent of free representation³ a vertical structure of consensus has been created which is no longer based on single issues or interests but on those individuals called to decide, inasmuch as they are invested with the trust of those they represent⁴.

Within the limits in which these mechanisms have developed, countries in western Europe have brought about that political form we know as representative democracy. However, political democracy needed and still needs to conserve the idea of unity of the group as that sacred

² Democratic societies, as has been rightly written, "function *by means of ideologies* just as others function as a result of coercion". Without this "the very sense of action remains incomprehensible, as if *invisible*, in spite of the multiplicity of real reforms that have been undertaken" (see R. Sue, *Temps et ordre social*, Paris, PUF, 1994, pages 259–260).

³ The expression is Weber's. See M. Weber, *Economia e società* Milan, Comunità, 1980, Vol. I, page 291.

⁴ Regarding the importance of trust in community life see L. Roniger, *La fiducia nelle società moderne*, Soveria Mannelli, Rubbettino, 1992.

moment in which the collective will is formed and, at the same time, to maintain the differentiation of the elite who contend and compete on the political scene, to apply values that take root within the conscience of individuals and to regulate public time in accordance with a deep felt moral law. Democracy is based on the search for truth and justice within the historic context and not on the individual utility and manipulative efficiency of ideas. Therefore, in the history of all peoples democracy is a difficult and delicate construct that needs to be carefully protected.

2. Time of the Masses

The social context within which an initial form of representative democracy grew up changed progressively, particularly toward the end of the last century when there began to be a more frequent presence of crowds and the phenomena of the masses. The times of the masses and the economy then began to substitute the times of the elite and ideology. The diffusion of crowd psychology and mass phenomena was immediately viewed with suspicion and alarm by both progressive and conservative alike, on this side of the Atlantic and the other.⁵ It was no longer possible to think of a social order founded on individual values and on the elite. Aggregation and unity of the group were no longer formed in a vertical manner but horizontally, it was no longer possible to maintain political values separate from the interests of the marketplace.

Economic time then began to substitute ideological times. The economy introduced a cold passion into the political arena, that of vested interests, a calculated reasoning more appropriate to mass phenomena.⁶ It sanctioned a culture of quantity and exchange. It was better adapted to mass phenomena since it conducted ideology toward a more abstract level and substituted conflicts concerning the objectives of collective action with rules governing exchange. Economic time represents the time of rationalisation of the present. As a result, the vision of time contracts and is concentrated on the present. The control of space and simultaneity become dominating factors.⁷ Simultaneity substituted continuity. From a form of politics completely directed toward the future there was a move toward politics entirely involved with the present, favouring the interests of the masses.⁸

⁵ It is sufficient to remember, in no particular order, Marx, Engels, Taine, Renan, Baudelaire, Simmel, Valéry, the Chicago School, and the classic works of Le Bon, Freud and Ortega. On this subject see W. Benjamin, *Di alcuni motivi in Baudelaire*, in *Angelus Novus, Saggi e frammenti*, Turin, Einaudi, 1995.

⁶ See A.O. Hirschman, *Le passioni e gli interessi. Argomenti politici in favore del capitalismo prima del suo trionfo*, Milan, Feltrinelli, 1979.

⁷ See H. Nowotny, *Eigenzeit, Entstehung und Strukturierung eines Zeitgefühls*, Frankfurt, Suhrkamp, 1989, pages 11, 47 and 53.

⁸ See my publication *La cultura del presente. Tempo e storia nella tarda modernità* Milan, F. Angeli, 1993.

A radical upheaval commenced. Economic time is not the time of democracy. Interests are not chosen and discussed: they are imposed. The economic elite is not elected, it affirms itself. A society based on economic grounds is not a democratic society⁹ and its global effect, today the product of such economic grounds and which might appear to be the affirmation of the common good, does not further the ideals of emancipation of humanity but the force of sectarian and local interest that, by negotiation and accommodating agreement, manages to extend into ever greater areas.

The emergence of economic time marks the beginning of a development within political life leading to the formation of the *economistic mentality*, today dominant as the all-embracing ideology, just as Mannheim predicted.¹⁰ The time problem, today much debated by sociologists, also stems from this. In fact, in late modernity economic time has now become the *economy of time*.

With economic time we have come to the extreme opposite of the religious time, even though the latter dominated political life for several centuries. Economic time is just as totalitarian as that of religion, but while the latter, inasmuch as being individual time, sought a fixity and full identity between the individual and the cosmos until the singularity of the individual disappeared, the former, founded on the representation and social composition of vested interests, is the triumph of temporariness, of transience, of changeability, of the negotiation of each defined identity. It is the inconsistency of the social bond that denies every stable relationship, from family ties to political belief and cultural traditions.¹¹ The culture of late modernity is the triumph of economic time that has become the predominant mentality. It immerses man in the variety and variability of all things, where everything is interesting and nothing is meaningful.¹² In order to re-appropriate that reality to which every individual aspires, it places faith in the control of space, it turns time into an eternal present, progressively excluding individual time and imposing the organisation and harmonisation of social time.

Economic time does not give us ideals toward which social reality must move but rather methods and schemes for recreating a reality more and more like itself. The cold passion of vested interest is accompanied by the cold ideal of a society anchored in the present and levelled out by the mechanical rhythm of economic cycles. On the one hand, the scheme of a global society prevails where dominant interests are exalted on the other. It is imposed in a totalitarian manner in everyday life while the life of the individual remains without moral references or values, giving rise to a diffused anarchy re-awakening the symptoms of a primitive society.

⁹ See G. Burdeau, *Le libéralisme*, Paris, Ed. du Seuil, 1979, page 161 onward.

¹⁰ K. Mannheim, *Ideologia e utopia*, Bologna, Il Mulino, 1957, Page 272 onward.

¹¹ Of significance on this subject is the recent work of Z. Bauman, *Da pellegrino a turista*, in "Rassegna Italiana di Sociologia" a. XXXVI, n. 1, January-March 1995.

¹² Cf G. Simmel, *Concetto e tragedia della cultura*, in ID., *Arte e civiltà* Milan, ISEDI, 1976, page 106.

3. Transformations of Democracy

This process has led to a radical ideological transformation of the meaning of contemporary politics. When mass phenomena first appeared an attempt was made to give an adequate response by constructing a *policy for the masses*, namely by widening the suffrage, modifying the structure of political parties, recognising union action as legitimate, accepting the mixing of ideological values and vested interest. The attempt was made to save representative democracy by opening up politics to the masses, at the same time searching to control it by use of more rigid forms of political voluntarism. However, this operation failed from the standpoint of democracy and could only be re-attempted through totalitarian forms: radicalising ideology, discriminating citizenship and basing representation not on rational choices but on a strong emotional relationship, of a charismatic nature, between the leader and the masses.

The disastrous collapse of totalitarian regimes indicates that even this radical experience was incapable of withstanding the process of differentiation taking place in modern-day culture as a result of the unilateral principle on which its internal logic was based. Mass phenomena cannot take form in a situation of one-party political representation. It requires the counterweight of seeing the affirmation of great differentiation and the most extreme level of utilitarian individualism.

With the failure of attempts to construct a policy for the masses, the post-World War II period hailed the *entry of the masses into politics*. The *mass regime* radically changed the social panorama that politics should have represented. The needs changed as did the relationships of dominance. While the old mechanisms of representative democracy were revealed as being ever more inefficient and malfunctioning, attempts were begun to remodel politics based on the phenomena and interests of the masses. Today we have begun to be aware that a political form still based on the old model of representative democracy is a form of *politics that is out of step with the times*; politics instead should observe the changes taking place in social organisation attentively and, as a consequence, adopt appropriate new models and a new democratic structure.

But what is it that no longer functions in the structure of democratic representation? Ideological transformation has already been mentioned. Politics has used the economy as an instrument for representation and control of the masses, up to the point that today politics is largely a matter of economics and within such an ideological context denies every value of mediation, marginalizes morals and limits citizenship and representation, the very cornerstones of democracy, to forms that no longer have substance. *Public time*, within which democratic dialect took place, has become *publicity time*, the objective of which is no longer the search for truth and justice but the search for effect, by means of which advantage can be gained. Citizenship is no longer the moral bond rendering social inequalities acceptable. The citizen

has been substituted by “he who has the right”,¹³ a concept that undermines every type of solidary bond. Representation is no longer the bond and tie between the representative and those represented but has, instead, been reduced to the mechanism for electing representatives, that is to say, it has become an empty vessel. Even more alarming is the fact that today it is no longer free representation but representation of vested interests, namely a debased form of representation¹⁴ limited in time, space and function.

4. The Trouble with Politics

None of the mechanisms of representative democracy function any longer and, moreover, neither are they leaving space for various attempts to affirm totalitarian tendencies of either political or social origin, ranging from religious fundamentalism to racism and nationalism. The trouble with politics is accentuated by the fact that it no longer finds itself facing the task of reconciling only *real society* with *ideal society*. There is no longer *one* society asking to be represented. The realms of experience have moved apart and isolated themselves to form their own circumscribed realities. The economic world is almost completely out of touch with the religious world and that of culture. Furthermore, besides the sphere of personal experience, politics must today come to terms with the *represented society* created by the media and with the *virtual society* of the electronic village. Politics must therefore take into account various non-political forms of constructing social unity, of creating mass phenomena and of arriving at a consensus. In politics there is the need to negotiate with several powers derived from this experience which are relatively autonomous. For this reason politics has become complex and difficult. The old political organisation, at this point reduced to an *oligarchic apparatus* that unites the force of centralism with the weakness of consensus, resorts to various expedients in order to guarantee its survival. It uses all those structures that escape the control of democracy in an oppressive manner: from the bureaucracy to the tax authorities, from centres of information to the secret service. It exerts pressure by using time as a normative structure and an instrument of social control (system of schedules in whatever sense, in fact, places constraints on and limits the liberty of everyone), it gives rein to the free play of vested interests, allowing the most powerful to prevail, without seeking to impose limits on them through the use of its representative nature. In the face of a lack of public commitment, it attempts to capture the people in private; being incapable of procuring consensus it relies on means of mass communication which leads to two results: firstly it draws even greater attention to its own insubstantiality, and secondly, it fabricates the power of the communicators who, from being technicians in the field of information, are transformed into representatives of a would-be public opinion.¹⁵

¹³ G. Burdeau, *Le libéralisme*, quote from page 291 onward.

¹⁴ Cf again M. Weber, *op. cit.*, vol. I, page 295.

¹⁵ R. Sue, *op. cit.* page 251.

Economy as an ideology, a culture of the present, political crisis: all the conditions exist for the decline of democracy. At the root of this decline there is the denial of those wide temporal horizons that were the food of modern culture and political ideology. Every society produces its own time and its own representation of time, just as every form of politics is an interpretation of time and, therefore, of the cultural values that it produces. Wherever there is the effort to fossilise time by emphasising only one temporal dimension (in this case the present), democracy and politics come to an end. Today the culture of the present denies politics and transforms representative democracy into a democracy of the image and of representation. On the other hand, as has been mentioned, politics seems to be *out of step with the times* and this fact undermines politics, making it impossible to arrive at a consensus, paralysing collective action. That is to say, political democracy now suffers the effect of delays that have accumulated with regard to representation and social dialogue. Therefore, the real political crisis concerns its representative nature.¹⁶

At this point, either we accept that political time has come to an end and that the future will be decided by economic time and the force of vested interest that will give post-modern culture a monolithic form, or we believe that contemporary culture will once more acquire its values and, above all, the meaning and function of politics and representative democracy, even though these will be modelled on a new social reality. In the latter case politics will have to find an answer to the challenges facing it as posed by the new and differentiated social powers. What is required is a recovery of *public time*, as the time of politics, in answer to economic time and, therefore, politics must return to being the *expression of our times*.

In the first instance it will be necessary to overcome the distortion through which confusion is created between the public and publicity. The public is the search for truth and justice within a particular historical context by means of democratic confrontation and not just stimulation and effect. Public time exalts subjectivity, advertising kills it. Public time leads in an opposite direction from economic time, which is the economy of time. Economic time is the dictatorship of an abstract and quantitative representation of rationality that excludes all subjectivity. Therefore economic time is by no means the time of democracy. The economy encloses spaces and time within a formal organisation that represents dominant interests, democracy means leaving space and time for others to represent themselves. All organisation of time becomes oligarchic inasmuch as it denies time to others. Organised time is the time of the strongest for the strong.

The recovery of political time means that politics must return to representing our times. All forms of representation in history, however, are based on an awareness of the passing of time and of social and political evolution. Therefore, to recover political representation in our times means to *escape from the culture of the present* and the political immobility deriving from it

¹⁶ See my publication *Forme e formule della rappresentanza politica*. Milan, F. Angeli, 1994.

which leads to the denial of politics. In the culture of the present there is a political utopia turned on its head:¹⁷ the claim to be fixed historically once and for all, thereby translating politics into the administration of things. That image projected by Marx into the future becomes part of the present. Only Marx foresaw the liberation of man from dominating relationships while here what is foreseen is the stabilisation of relationships, within existing political forces and the creation of a great Leviathan that denies change by swallowing up the dimensions of time.

In conclusion, if politics is to return to representing our times, if representative democracy must recuperate the role it once had in modern times, it is necessary to ask ourselves how it can be reconstructed in a social context characterised by marked pluralism, by the mass regime and, alternatively, by the phenomena of extreme individualism and anarchical tendencies. How can this reality be represented politically?

This is the problem facing those who study political matters: that of the formation, the polarisation and the representation of consensus in the mass regime. The phenomena of formation and legitimisation of power in this historical context have been little studied, however the conditions for the functioning of a new democratic system depend only on this complex reality. The time of democracy can only be reconstructed with great difficulty and by including the emerging aspects of vital worlds in new forms of representation and in a renewed vision of public time: the experience of social circles to which one belongs, that of mass phenomena and of individual spaces and creativity. Once this problem is resolved we could probably move on from a democracy founded on ideology to a democracy of the vital worlds, in which the subject returns to being the arbiter and creator of his own times.

¹⁷ Here I have taken up an expression of Norbert Elias. Cf N. Elias, *The retreat of Sociologists into the Present*, in "Theory, Culture of Society", Special Issue, *Norbert Elias and Figurational Sociology*, Vol. 4, Numbers 2–3, June, 1987.